Neighborhood Schools and Religious Institutions

The Ascension parish contains diversity of churches and schools, which make it a unique and interesting area. The parish has shrunk in size to about a tenth of the size it used to be, which makes for a diverse culture. Within this diverse area is a tightly bound community. The people within the community look past racial and ethnic differences and focus on the people inside. Thus, the community is somewhat like a family that supports one another through thick and thin. In the Ascension neighborhood, the churches and the schools have enabled the area to join and unite as a community and have a bright outlook for the future.

Ascension parish covers a large portion of north Minneapolis. As would be expected, not all of the people living in the parish are Catholic. There are several religious institutions in the neighborhood, so that everyone’s needs and preferences may be met.

Bethlehem Lutheran Church is best known for its architecture. Built in 1926, it is constructed mostly out of Minnesota Blue Limestone. The Gothic design includes a one-hundred foot tall central tower, and pillars lining the inside. The church seats five-hundred people and the aisles are arranged in the shape of a cross. Over one thousand people attend service at Bethlehem in an average week. On holidays the numbers increase even more drastically (B.L.C.).
The members of the congregation are especially proud of three things in particular in their building. There is a baptismal fountain and a painting on the altar that were brought from the original church. They date back to the year 1898! There is also a Casavant organ which was designed and built in 1966 especially for Bethlehem Lutheran Church by Casavant Freres himself. It contains nearly 3,000 pipes, three keyboards, and a Zimbelstern, which is a small instrument that randomly rings bells as the organ plays (B.L.C.). Stained-glass windows also adorn the church, and the pictures in them follow the story of Jesus Christ. The windows are donated by members of the parish as a memorial to people special to them. The pride taken by its members in maintaining the historical beauty of the church is apparent the moment you step in the door.

Fourth Baptist Church, located at Fremont Avenue North and 21st Avenue in Minneapolis, was started in 1881 as nothing more than a Sunday School. It eventually gained enough popularity that they were able to have their own building, a Jewett Chapel on Lyndale and 11th Avenue North in Minneapolis. In 1885 they went a step further and constructed their own building on the corner of 18th Avenue North and Dupont Avenue. The building which is used today was built in 1920. The church continued to grow rapidly, and over 700 people were attending mass weekly in 1954 (F.B.C.). Today Fourth Baptist is continuing to thrive, carrying out its mission to be “a 1st century church in a 21st century world.”

There is also a Catholic church dedicated to the Vietnamese Catholic Community of Minneapolis. It is called St. Joseph Hein Roman Catholic Church, and is located on Dupont Avenue, very near to Ascension. They hold five weekly masses under the
direction of Father Jim Ngo Houng Khoi, and Father Andrew Do Linh Sang, as well as a mass every evening Monday through Friday.

Oddly enough, there is another Catholic church within Ascension’s parish. It is St. Philip, and it is a church run by the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, which is why it can be in the same area. St. Philip was originally a Polish church community that was founded in 1906. In 1908, the first presiding pastor, Father S. Zdechlik, began the building of a combined church and school building, which was completed two years later. When the school opened in 1911, it was run by Franciscan Sisters of Sylvania, Ohio and later taken over by School Sisters of Notre Dame. The latter ran the school until it closed in 1972. The building currently used, which seats 540 people, was being built from 1963 through 1965, right around the time that the Second Vatican Council was putting the Catholic Church through some major reform changes (Wright). The more modern design of St. Philip was greatly influenced by these changes that the council was setting into place. This same design won first place in the Lecaro Medal architectural award competition in 1963 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

While St. Philip now is home to an extremely diverse culture and a wide variety of ethnic groups, there are still remnants of their Polish heritage, such as the beautiful Chapel Shrine which honors Our Lady of Czestochowa, the Black Madonna, who is the Patroness Saint of Poland. Today, 250 households of the Hawthorne neighborhood, consisting of Polish, Hmong, Hispanic, African American, and many other backgrounds are registered with the church (Wright).

Another church in the Ascension neighborhood is He is Risen Church of God In Christ, located on Russell Avenue. The story of their current pastor is one of special
significance. Pastor Stanford L. Robinson had serious problems with alcoholism and drugs until 1989. He was able to overcome these obstacles, and began ministering in 1991. In 1992 he was made the Assistant Pastor at the church, and was moved up to Pastor only three years later, in 1995 (H.I.R). Pastor Robinson is a wonderful inspiration to many of the members of the church.

He is Risen is also known for the many special events it holds throughout the year, including Pack-a-Pew Sunday, Family and Friends Day, and Dress Down Sunday. They hold many prayer meetings, Bible studies, and meetings of musical groups during the week, and have a service every Sunday.

St. Olaf was founded in 1941. The original building ironically was destroyed by a fire on Ash Wednesday in 1953. A new building was constructed in 1955, and this building is still used today. The church has expanded a lot over the years, adding on a chapel in 1980, and a parish center in 1990. The church itself seats more than 1200 people from 1500 different households. St. Olaf draws people from all over the metro area to the over 30 scheduled services per week. Every Sunday one of their masses is broadcast on the radio, which has been done since 1975. The weekly bulletin is sent to over 300 different zip codes in 27 states (St. O). Over the years St. Olaf has had many notable visitors, including John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Jimmy Durante, and Maria von Trapp. The church has social justice programs connected to places all over the world, including the St. Olaf Social Outreach program started in 1974, which has its own garden, which is used to provide food and flowers for less fortunate people both locally and as far away to Nairobi, Kenya.
There are no synagogues directly in the Ascension parish, though there very close to the boundaries. One, the Shir Tikvah Congregation, on the northern side of the parish, and another, Temple Israel, which lies just two blocks south of the Ascension parish, on Emerson Avenue North.

The church system plays a major role in the community in Ascension. When times are good and when times are bad, people of the community turn to the churches to practice their religion and unite as a whole. All of the churches provide a home away from home for the community. The churches have that in common. The religion differs in some of the churches, but they all provide a safe, well maintained home used for prayer and community.

Education has become a staple all across America today. America has put great stock into the education systems. Taxes are established to fund public schools. Some parents choose to send their child or children to a high price private school or institution to insure they will receive an excellent education. The children in today’s society are looked at as the future of The United States. If the children are the future, they need to be well educated to allow the continuation of growth and maturity not only within The United States and the rest of the world. The Children will be the leaders of the future. Ascension does not differ from this. The schools within Ascension have blossomed to become fine academic institutions. They provide not only a quality education, but a good experience for the students as well. The main schools in the Ascension area to be focused on are North Star Community School, Hall School, and Willard Elementary School.
North Star Community School is located at 2410 Girard Avenue. The school is Kindergarten through fifth grade which enrolls 715 students (N.S.C.S.). As suggested in the name of the school, it is a community school. The school strives to maintain a close community within the school and outside. Community is a great tool to have in a Kindergarten through fifth grade school. At younger ages, the students look for other classmates they can bond with and become friends. Through these friendships the students will most likely want to attend school to learn and also to be with their friends. It is important to develop long-term friendships and North Star looks to accomplish that goal. North Star tries to combine academia with human relations. The school also looks to get the parents involved with the education process. Over a child’s life, their parents can be their most important teacher. North Star allows the parents to be involved by having meetings which can include knowing what their child is learning in school, what they can do to help their child, and upcoming news or events. By making North Star a friendly environment, while still focusing on academics, North Star maintains a good community for the students.

North Star has a mission statement that it stands by. The mission statement “is to create a safe learning environment for students, staff, parents, and the community at large which will foster the development of critical and creative thinkers who set high academic goals, make appropriate choices, and communicate effectively and respectfully with the adults and children in our diverse community” (N.S.C.S.). Their mission statement clearly shows that North Star Community School is dedicated to the educating of their students. They want their students to be goal oriented and be able to be successful. North Star feels that kindergarten through fifth grade is a key period in a child’s life
where he or she lays the building blocks of who they will develop into as a person in the future. The principal of the school is Dorothy Samuels. She stands by the mission statement and looks to improve the school whenever need be. Along with the mission statement, Principal Samuels also guides her students on four key ingredients to make any child more successful as written about in the newsletter. The first ingredient is support. Students should feel that there are people around them that will lend them a helping hand if needed. There will always be someone who cares about the student as a person, and about their success. Secondly, boundaries is a key component. The kids need adults who act like adults. Students that have parents who are firm and loving have children that perform better in school. They execute better academically, are more disciplined, and get into less trouble than kids whose parents are either too strict, or too lenient. The third key factor is empowerment. Students should get involved. They should be engaged in school, the community, religious organizations, or other opportunities that allow them to give back to the community. Lastly, every student should have a library card. Reading is a fundamental process everyone needs to learn. The card allows the student to work on their reading skills and have some responsibility borrowing and retuning books (N.S.C.S.). These four ingredients will help the students have a successful experience academically at North Star Community School.

Along with the four ingredients to make any child successful, North Star also has three key expectations. Firstly, every student should be respectful. This includes respecting others physically, verbally, and their property. The second expectation is to be responsible. Students should be on time to class and be prepared to work; they should stay on task and always give one-hundred percent. Thirdly, students should be
cooperative. The kids should ask for help when needed, be able to work with others, and finally, to be kind and helpful towards others. The school also has certain rules that it sticks to. The students should follow the directions of the teacher, walk in straight orderly lines, use appropriate language, work on all assignments, remain in their assigned space, use quiet voices, and touch people and things appropriately (N.S.C.S.). These expectations and rules have formed the school into what it is today, a well respected, safe, and quality school where parents feel confident sending their students to.

Another primary school in the Ascension area is Hall School. Similar to North School, Hall School is kindergarten through fifth grade. However, the school enrollment is much smaller. The total enrollment is only 380 students (H.S.). Hall School has a good reputation of giving students a good education. The staff is well trained to provide the students with good skills. The staff is trained in SRA, which is a reading mastery program for the kids. Hall feels that reading is a fundamental and elementary ability all students need to learn and be accustomed with. Hall School gives back to the community too. It has cooperative activities with community agencies to do service. One program they are connected to is Wells Fargo Bank tutoring. General Mills also does a tutoring program that is connected to Hall School that is intended specifically for third graders. Both these programs help students who are in need of extra academic assistance and allow all of the children to remain on task with their work. On the other end of the spectrum, there are also some important programs to help students who have special or unique talents. Hall School feels that if a student has a special or unique talent it should be blossomed and developed. A possible program that a student can be inducted into is Accelerated Read and CCC BB (H.S.). This program allows a student, who has excellent
reading skills, to be able to be recognized and learn at a faster rate. This will keep from students getting bored or distracted from working at a slower pace. The school recognizes all the students and rewards them for their achievements.

At Hall School there is an all day kindergarten program. The kindergarten program allows the young children to begin their schooling at a good place. The kids are able to meet one another and make friends and establish relationships along the way. Kindergarten is essential in the development of a child. The children learn how to act in a school environment. They begin to learn rules and responsibilities at a young age to set a basis for their learning. Bernadeia Johnson, the school principal, feels that kindergarten is a vital time in a person’s life. School is a new thing for the children and the first year can set the stage of how the children will act in the future. Another important aspect Principal Johnson views is music. She wants the students to be able to play and make music. Once again, if the student has a special talent in music, Principal Johnson does not want to deprive the child of that opportunity. She wants the students to be able to exploit their talents, and if one of their talents is music, the students should be able to play. Parallel to North Star, family involvement is important (H.S.). The parents of the kids should be just as involved as the student. The parents should urge on their children and help them with their studies and work. Hall believes in family involvement to the extent that there is a leadership program for the parents. This program allows the parents to attend meetings about the school, get to know other students, and become a leader for the school. Principal Johnson considers that parent leadership is great for the kids. Students can sometimes be shy of teachers and classes, but if there are familiar faces of parents, it makes the students time at school more enjoyable and less stressful for them.
Overall, Hall School provides an excellent source for education in the Ascension area. It has many programs for both the students and family to get involved and take an active approach in academia.

Willard Elementary School is another important and established school in Ascension. However, Willard has some major differences than North Star and Hall. Willard Elementary School is more focused on math, science, and technology whereas the other schools focused mainly on reading. The mission statement for Willard says the “staff will support students in attaining skills necessary in order to take responsibility for their own learning and behavior. Staff and students will recognize, accept and value strengths and differences of every individual. Teachers will provide opportunities for students to be honored/recognized for their accomplishments. The Willard School Community will develop an integrating curriculum which emphasizes standards, grade level expectations and student achievement” (W.E.S). Clearly stated from the mission statement, the staff at Willard is primed to give the students the best education they can. The teachers and staff allow the students to be successful and be rewarded, which gives the students a goal and ambition.

One major advantage for Willard Elementary School is that the students have access to Macintosh and IBM computers. Willard is similar to that of a technology school; therefore, they have calculators, video cameras, and many other sources of technology that can be used at any grade level or subject (W.E.S.). In today’s society, computers and technology is being used in everyday life and is a necessity for the future. It is important for Willard to give the students access to these resources and give the students a head start in the world of technology.
Willard Elementary School’s philosophy is well thought out and put into action. One of the school’s goals is to “help the students develop into independent thinkers, problem solvers and lifelong learners who will meet the challenges of the 21st century” (W.E.S). Willard attempts to accomplish this goal by giving the students a challenging curriculum to make the students think independently and formulate their own opinions and ideas. By doing this, the students should be able to be shaped into well rounded individuals who have the skills and ability to think on their own and become leaders. The curriculum at Willard includes math, science, social studies, technology, health, fine arts, and physical education. Morning meetings are also used as an important learning devise. The meetings evolve the student’s ability to have proper and healthy social skills. All of these subjects have importance and should be learned by children today. Analogous to North Star and Hall School, parent and family involvement is recommended. Willard has a day that is scheduled as “Parent Involvement Day.” This day the parents are welcome to come to school and become involved in the classroom and learning. Another program they offer is “Family Math Night” (W.E.S). Anyone in the family can come and work on their math skills. This helps the students become more involved and excited to learn. It also allows the students to be with their parents with whom they are often more comfortable with. The students are encouraged to take advantage of their fine arts program. There are art classes, singing, instrumental music, media arts and physical education. This gives the kids a wide variety of areas where they can become involved.

The big three, math, science, and technology, are the most important to the school. The school attempts to integrate these three areas into all the subjects and the students are encouraged to understand and enjoy them. Overall, Willard is somewhat
different than North Star and Hall in the way that it is more of a technology school, but all of the schools offer a good education, safe environments, basic skills, and family involvement. These areas help turn these schools in Ascension into great schools where parents can send their children knowing they will receive a good education.

The Ascension area has become a unique part of the city of Minneapolis. It provides an area with diversity and a strong sense of community from within. It can be looked as a model of a well balanced community. The churches and schools in Ascension have come to be known as places where families can bond with other families while not discriminating or being fearful of diversity or ethnicity. The area is an exciting place where the people can grow, mature and have a great future.